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Park vermiculite prompts fresh look at screenings

By Brent Shrum
Kootenai Valley Record

The discovery of vermiculite in soil used as fill for a soccer field at J. Neils Memorial County Park is prompting Environmental Protection Agency officials to take another look at properties screened for contamination in 2002 and 2003.

The contaminated fill came from a residential property in Libby that had been screened in 2002. At the time, visible vermiculite was observed in the soil but analysis by polarized light microscopy returned results of "non-detect" for asbestos fibers, and a cleanup was not triggered. Some vermiculite was later found on another portion of the property, and that area was cleaned, EPA team leader Paul Peronard said during a meeting last Wednesday with the county commissioners.

Both the property owner and the county apparently believed that the soil had been given a clean bill of health by the EPA, and it was transported to the park last fall. When vermiculite was observed recently at the soccer field, however, agency contractors were called in to remove the top six inches of soil from the entire field.

"There's not a whole lot of vermiculite in the soil," Peronard said. "Especially at the time of year it was removed, it would be hard to see."

The incident highlights the inadequacy of procedures used by the EPA to inform people of the status of their property, Peronard said.

"You can have a homeowner that has a letter that says it's non-detect by PLM and he thinks everything is all right, but it's not, because of the visible vermiculite," Peronard said.

The agency needs to take steps to help prevent similar situations from creating problems in the future,

See *Screenings* on Page 7

Screenings

Continued from Page 1

Peronard said.

"I think it's important that we at the EPA get more involved in this day-to-day commerce in dirt, because people are moving dirt around here all the time," he said.

Recent activity-based sampling, in which workers in protective suits simulate everyday activities in the home and garden, have indicated that the presence of visible vermiculite is the strongest indicator of potential exposure to asbestos, Peronard said. The findings are undercutting the emphasis previously placed on microscopic analysis.

"We're smarter now than we were in 2003," Peronard said.

Studies have also shown that exposures are tied to close physical contact with asbestos-containing materials, Peronard said. Air monitoring near contaminated sites hasn't shown dust blown by the wind to be a problem, he said.

"Downwind exposures are not high on my list of worries," he said.